

Congresswoman NYDIA M. VELAZQUEZ

*Representing New York's 12th Congressional District
Ranking Democratic Member, House Small Business Committee*



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Velázquez Unveils National Housing Counseling Legislation

Congresswoman Velázquez unveiled bipartisan legislation to strengthen and expand housing counseling opportunities so that families in New York City and across the nation can experience the American dream of homeownership.

"The process of purchasing a home is complicated and daunting," Congresswoman Velazquez said. "With the support and guidance of housing counselors, families can successfully navigate confusing loan terms, assess closing fees, and fully evaluate the costs of purchasing and maintaining a home. Housing counseling helps ensure that families are armed with a thorough understanding of the homebuying process before they walk into a lender's office."

The Velazquez bill targets low-income families, the elderly, individuals who face language barriers and other consumers who are more vulnerable

to the predatory practices of unscrupulous lenders. The legislation also authorizes federal grants to provide a direct source of funding to local agencies and non-profit organizations providing housing counseling services.

In New York City, the homeownership rate is the lowest of any major metropolitan area in the country. At the same time, the default and foreclosure rate is skyrocketing in disadvantaged communities in the city and across the country, as families who were not prepared to purchase their home face high mortgage payments they cannot afford.

"Housing counseling is critical to closing the homeownership gap, and stemming the tide of defaults and foreclosures," Congresswoman Velazquez said. "It is a first step in ensuring that future homebuyers know what is on the table and what is at stake when signing a loan to purchase their home."

The Fight Continues to Reopen New York City Firehouses

In response to six city firehouses being closed last year, Congresswoman Velázquez called on the Bloomberg administration to allocate a portion of the \$400 million requested from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in its FY 05 budget proposal to reverse the closures.

"The negative consequences of these firehouse closures is apparent," Congresswoman Velázquez said. "The number of fire deaths in our city increased 23 percent in 2003, and fire response times in some areas have grown by approximately 1 minute and 20 seconds – a span that can mean the difference between life and death. Just this past December, a neighborhood previously served by Engine Company 212 witnessed unnecessary destruction when a fire burned an additional 11 houses as firefighters waited for back up."

Mayor Bloomberg's decision to close down the firehouses last May was met with strong opposition from Congresswoman Velázquez, other elected officials, residents, and community activists. Engine 212 was closed despite the fact that it served Greenpoint and Williamsburg, which both contain over 40 million gallons of oil and gas stored in above ground tanks, a Keyspan liquid natural gas facility, and the Buckeye pipeline carrying jet fuel under the streets of these neighborhoods.

The firehouse closings also pose homeland security concerns. In Brooklyn, firehouses are key to protecting the safety of the surrounding community, but also the centers of business, education, culture and tourism. Brooklyn encompasses several sights which could be potential terrorist targets, such as the Williamsburg and Brooklyn bridges, subways, court-houses and the Greenpoint waterfront.



Congresswoman Velázquez speaks at a rally urging the reopening of Brooklyn's Engine Company 212.

"Given the serious first responder needs in New York City, I am urging the Mayor to designate a portion of the city's homeland security funds to reopen the firehouses," Congresswoman Velázquez said. "The estimated cost savings from closing the firehouses was less than \$10 million, which is just 2.5 percent of the \$400 million requested by Mayor Bloomberg from the Department of Homeland Security. This is a small investment to pay now in an effort to protect – and even save – hundreds of thousands of lives in the future."

Public Safety Concerns Addressed at Cooper Park Houses

Congresswoman Velázquez recently convened a meeting at Cooper Park Houses to discuss its upcoming renovation, beginning this March, to install new elevators that meet ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and housing standards. Congresswoman Velázquez helped to secure the federal funding to provide upgrades to Cooper Park Houses, and is working to bring additional resources into her district for public housing modernization projects.

“In this meeting, it is critical that we address the renovation process and how best to meet the needs of local tenants as it occurs,” Congresswoman Velázquez said. “These upgrades are desperately needed.”

An important component of the reconstruction process was to ensure that during the renovations, all steps are taken to ensure resident safety. In order to facilitate this, the Congresswoman arranged to meet with leaders from the Cooper Park Tenant Association, representatives from the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), officers from the 94th Police

Precinct, the Commanding Officer from Police Service Area 3 (PSA3) and a representative from the NYPD Crime Prevention Unit to discuss a strategy.

“I want to work with law enforcement officials and local residents to ensure that we are taking the necessary steps to prevent public safety problems during the renovation process,” Congresswoman Velázquez said. “It is important that when housing developments undergo these type of renovations, that could result in temporarily causing residents to walk up poorly lit stairways, it only heightens the concerns within these buildings. Increased vertical patrolling, frequent building inspections and light checks are among some of the measures must be undertaken.”

Cooper Park Houses in Brooklyn has eleven, 7-story buildings with 699 apartments. The unit houses about 1,753 residents.

Velázquez Makes a Stop at Ridgewood Older Adult Center

Congresswoman Velázquez visited with senior citizens at the Ridgewood Older Adult Center to address their concerns on issues such as access to health care, affordable housing, and protecting social security.

“Ridgewood Older Adult Center plays a critical role in addressing the challenges that face our senior citizens today – both physically and emotionally,” Congresswoman Velázquez said. “Because of the work done here, older residents throughout our community are able to learn more about important housing and financial issues, to participate in activities with their peers, enjoy meals and build relationship. It is important to reach out to seniors and to educate them on the issues that deeply affect their quality of life during their golden years.”

Congresswoman Velázquez discussed her opposition to the Republican Medicare reform bill, which will increase costs, reduce drug benefits, jeopardize current health coverage for hundreds of thousands of New York seniors, and pave the way to the privatization of Medicare. Under the new Medicare bill, New Yorkers will no longer be able to rely on the state’s Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage (EPIC) prescription program. As a result, close to 540,000 of the state’s poorest seniors will pay more for prescription drugs, and 240,000 will lose coverage altogether.

“Along with the majority of Americans, I believe all seniors are entitled to comprehensive health care, and that includes access to affordable prescription drugs,” Congresswoman Velázquez said.

She also discussed her efforts to pursue Social Security safeguards, and ensure that seniors had options available to



Ridgewood, Maspeth, Glendale and Middle Village, and offers assistance on housing and financial issues.

Grants Awarded to Our Community

Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC)

- Beth Chana School for Girls -- \$16,200
 - Bnos Chayil -- \$29,615
 - United Talmudical Academy -- \$246,593
 - Yeshiva Bnos Ahavas Israel -- \$11,880
 - Yeshiva Tzemach Tzadik Viznitz -- \$9,768
 - Mount Carmel Academy -- \$8,793
 - St. Vincent de Paul School -- \$9,094
 - St. Cecilia School -- \$21,600
- all USAC grants are to provide schools and libraries with funds to install wiring and electronic equipment needed for e-mail capability and Internet access*

Department of Health and Human Services

- NYC Dept. of Health and Mental Hygiene -- \$3,959,513
- to help families by supporting programs that provide free immunizations for children against vaccine-preventable diseases*
- NYC Office of the Mayor -- \$122,103,117
- to develop, organize and operate programs that provide health care and support services for individuals living with HIV and their families*

Department of Homeland Security

- Metropolitan Transit Authority -- \$27,783,281
- for first responders to purchase equipment and conduct training exercises to respond to a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive attack on NYC's transit system*
- NYC Fire Dept. -- \$715,000
- for first responders to purchase equipment to increase the capability to respond to, and recover from threats or acts of terrorism*
- City of New York -- \$1,389,057
- to complete plans, procedures, and protocols for security and emergency preparedness on NYC's transit system*
- Port Authority of NY and NJ -- Port Commerce Dept. -- \$3,762,768
- for the purchase of emergency responder equipment and patrol vehicles to increase the capability to prevent, respond to, and recover from threats or acts of terrorism*